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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000629

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STATE ALSO PASS TO USAID
USAID/W FOR A/AID ANDREW NATSIOS, JBRAUSE
DCHA/OFDA KISAACS, GGOTTLIEB, MMARX, RTHAYER, BDEEMER
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA
DCHA/FFP FOR LAUREN LANDIS
DCHA DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR WILLIAM GARVELINK
ANE DEPUTY ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR MARK WARD
BANGKOK FOR OFDA SENIOR REGIONAL ADVISOR TOM DOLAN
KATHMANDU FOR OFDA REGIONAL ADVISOR WILLIAM BERGER
GENEVA FOR USAID KYLOH
ROME PASS FODAG
NSC FOR MELINE
CDR USPACOM FOR J3/J4/POLAD
USEU PASS USEC

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: EAID AEMR PREL PGOV CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA - SITUATION REPORT ON SRI LANKAN RESPONSE
TO EARTHQUAKE IN INDONESIA

REF: COLOMBO 616

Summary

¶11. On March 28, 2005, at 2315 local time, a magnitude 8.7 earthquake occurred off the coast of Indonesia, destroying buildings and causing numerous deaths on the Sumatran island of Nias. The following cable details the actions taken by the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) to alert residents to the possibility of tsunamis in the Indian Ocean and provides information on the situation in Trincomalee, Ampara, and Matara in the hours following the tsunami alert. End summary.

Actions Taken in Sri Lanka Following Reports of Earthquake in
Indonesia

¶12. On March 28, the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, speaking in a news interview with BBC News, stated that he met with the Sri Lankan President to convey information regarding the earthquake in Indonesia and the possibility that tsunamis may occur. Steps were immediately taken to order the evacuation of coastal areas. The President broadcast a message and urged people in northern and eastern Sri Lanka to move two km inland and those residents of southern Sri Lanka to move one km inland. According to the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, the Sri Lankan Army, Navy, and Government Agents were notified immediately of the tsunami alert. Broadcast announcements were made, and Tamil-held areas in the north and northeast and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were informed of the tsunami warnings.

Field Reports from Trincomalee

¶13. On March 29, the USAID/Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) Information Officer (IO) spoke with an Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) Program Development Officer (PDO) located in Trincomalee in northeastern Sri Lanka. The OTI/PDO stated that during the night of March 28 there were numerous methods by which local residents were informed of the earthquake in Indonesia and the tsunami warnings issued by the GOSL. Local television stations and Sri Lankan radio issued live telecasts and broadcasts with tsunami warnings; local temples held meetings to advise residents of the tsunami warnings; police made announcements over loudspeakers and also went door-to-door to advise residents to move to higher ground; sirens were sounded at 2320 hours local time to advise residents to evacuate; and local residents also received phone calls from relatives overseas advising them of the tsunami warnings. Local authorities also notified hotels in coastal areas of the tsunami warnings.

¶14. According to the OTI/PDO, many residents watched BBC News and heard the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister's interview and were thus aware that the U.S. Embassy had initially notified the GOSL of the earthquake and possible tsunamis. [Note: The OTI/PDO stated that residents he spoke with in Trincomalee believed that the U.S. Embassy did a quote good job end quote of informing the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, and this was a good early warning system. End Note.]

¶15. The OTI/PDO spoke to many individuals from various ethnic groups, and all praised the local media's response. The OTI/PDO stated that the only problem he observed was that cell phone and land lines remained busy throughout the night.

16. Regarding the situation in the Indian Ocean, the OTI/PDO stated that there were unconfirmed reports of changes in the ocean. Residents noticed a quote bad smell, end quote that is usually noticeable when lagoons are depleted of water. There was also an unconfirmed rumor that the ocean had receded 150 meters.

Field Reports from Ampara

17. On March 29, the USAID/DART IO spoke with an OTI/Procurement Specialist (PS) located in Ampara. The OTI/PS stated that the situation in Ampara was tense during the evening of March 28. Both private and GOSL-controlled television and radio stations announced tsunami alerts, and police also alerted residents via announcements through loudspeakers in local mosques. Local media also advised residents to remain alert for looting. The OTI/PS reported that many women and children in coastal areas moved inland to the main roads as a precautionary measure. However, many men in Ampara remained in their homes as they were observing the situation in the ocean.

18. The OTI/PS stated that after 330 hours local time, the situation became calmer, and around 345 hours local time, residents started moving back to coastal areas as the tsunami alert was lifted. The OTI/PS did not hear any stories or rumors regarding changes in the ocean in Ampara.

19. On March 29, a USAID/Colombo Foreign Service National (FSN) spoke with representatives of USAID/Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) implementing partner Mercy Corps in Arugam Bay in Ampara. The Mercy Corps representatives stated that they had been advised of the tsunami warnings through phone calls from relatives in

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England. Upon receipt of this information, the Mercy Corps representatives drove around town in their vehicles sounding their horns and went door-to-door to alert residents to the tsunami warnings.

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Field Reports from Matara

110. On March 29, a USAID/Colombo FSN spoke with representatives of USAID/OFDA implementing partner the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and reported that residents in Matara, on the south coast, were notified of the tsunami alerts via phone calls from relatives overseas as well as television and radio broadcasts. The IOM representatives stated that all television and radio channels continuously broadcast warnings advising residents to evacuate throughout the night. IOM representatives in Matara visited their temporary shelters and tents and noted that an hour after the tsunami alert was issued, people had fled these shelters and moved inland. IOM, as well as Mercy Corps, reported that the police and Sri Lankan Navy assisted in the evacuation of residents in Galle in southern Sri Lanka.

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